NEW EVERY MORNING
John 12:20-33
March 24, 1985

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It is stunning whenever it happens. Whenever one person voluntarily dies that others may live, the effect is powerful, compelling, and revealing. When a marine jumps on a grenade and in that act gives his own life and saves the lives of his buddies; when Father Maksymilian Kolbe steps out of the line of prisoners in the concentration camp and volunteers to die in the place of a fellow prisoner; something glorious about our humanity is affirmed, something almost unspeakably beautiful about human love is suggested. And something bright and clear about the nature of reality is revealed. Ted Gill defines good art as an "abrupt window" which allows us to see suddenly into the depths of reality. Thus Van Gogh with violet that pulsates and greens vividly alive - opens for us the reality of Iris: and J. S. Bach, alternating mathematic precision with soft, poignant melody, opens for us a window into the reality of human passion. Self sacrifice for principle lifts the hearts of all of us because of what it says about all of us: Bonhoeffer dying in a Nazi prison, or Msitlau Rostopovitch conducting his mentors and fellow Russian Shostokovich's "Fifth," at the Ohio Theatre Friday, with such incredible passion - that those present knew something heroic and defiant and selfless about our humanity was being affirmed. So, the voluntary dying for others stuns us with the truth of what it reveals about our own humanness and the incredible power of the love that is within us..."And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself," Jesus said.

The Christian faith is about a man who died, willingly. The Gospel is a story about one man who so loved the rest of us that he died willingly so that we might live. That sort of thing is stunning whenever it happens. And as the pace of Lent quickens and we come again to the cross of Jesus Christ, we experience the compelling power of that drama to draw us in.

Reflecting on the significance of the crucifixion in his work On Being a Christian, Hans Kung wrote:

> "Anyone who thinks that all religions and their 'founders' are alike will see the differences which appear if he compares the deaths of such men...Moses died in sight of the promised land...at the age of 120 - his eyes undimmed, his vigor unfaded. Buddha died at the age of eighty, his disciples around him. Confucius returned in old age to Lu - to continue and preserve his work...Muhammed, after he had thoroughly enjoyed the last years of his life as political ruler in Arabia, died in the midst of his harem in the arms of his favorite wife.
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> "Here on the other hand we have a young man of thirty, after three years at most of activity..Expelled from society, betrayed and denied by his disciples and supporters, mocked and ridiculed by his opponents, forsaken by men and even by God, he goes through a ritual of death that is one of the most atrocious and enigmatic ever invented by man's ingenious cruelty." (p. 334-335)

The best we can do, it seems, when confronted by the central symbol of the faith, is mumble questions: Why did it happen? What does it mean? Was it necessary? Even liturgically, the great hymns of the passion, abandon the normal confident, declaratory mode of the faith, and begin asking:

Ah, dearest Jesus,
How has thou offended?
Who was guilty?
Who brought this upon thee? - or

What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest friend.
For this thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?

And, of course, St. Paul: combative, original systematic theologian of the Gospel, at the cross of Jesus Christ is never more eloquent than in a question...

Where is the wise man?
Where is the scribe?
Has not God made foolish
The wisdom of the world? (I Corinthians 1:20)

Did it have to happen? Politically, sociologically the answer is "no." Of course it did not have to happen. Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the provincial Roman government of Palestine, essentially because it seemed like the politically, expedient thing to do that afternoon. He clearly had disturbed the peace. He obviously had managed to alienate and infuriate the power brokers within his own people in Jerusalem. They, in turn, frantically, almost desparately, in an all-night emergency session of the high court, tried to devise a creative way to convince Pilate that Jesus had done something seriously wrong enough to warrant execution. They never got that done, by the way. The imperial power of Rome backed into the most important and disastrous decision it ever made. It's governor, Pontius Pilate, tried to wash his hands of the whole affair, but finally, for expedience sake, ordered the execution. Barbara Tuchman's excellent book, The March of Folly, chronicles the grim human record of making foolish and wrong political decisions. Why, she asks, when important decisions are to be made, do we usually make the wrong one? Rome had other alternatives that day but failed to exercise them.

Historically, the crucifixion of Jesus was not inevitable. Theologically, however, it is a different story. Theologically, the story of the crucifixion of Jesus begins back on the edges of history, at the very beginning in fact, with the suggestion that there is one God, not many, and that the one God loves so much he calls creation into being, and then calls a people into being to so live in harmony with the creation that all the rest of the people will see in them their creator's intent and will. The story of the crucifixion begins with a rainbow in the sky when, in one of their earliest stories about a faithful family and the ark they built, this one God remembers Noah, and love overcomes anger and he provides for Noah and for life to continue. And then an elderly couple are given a future, as Abraham and Sarah move into a new land. The story of crucifixion unfolds as the one God hears the agony of his now captive people and sets them free and gives them a law which will provide life for them in a convenant with hope. And it reaches a crescendo 600 years before the fact, when that same covenant people are captive again, exiles in a foreign land, and one of their most powerful prophets and poets writes:

Behold the days are coming...when I will make a new covenant...
I will put my law within them
I will write it upon their hearts
And I will be their God,
And they shall be my people.

Theologically, the crucifixion of Jesus is not adequately described as an historical accident, or human cruelty and folly. Rather, theology sees in the crucifixion the consistent love of the God of the covenant, who continues to love his people and who loves them so thoroughly that the life of his son is poured out for them. Theology sees in the crucifixion - not simply what people did to Jesus, but what God has done and continues to do for us.

The compelling power of that also repels. And so the church that bears the name of the crucufied one often seems determined to disguise the reality of what happened. Aesthetically the cross is more palatable in burnished brass and polished silver. There was a now infamous incident several years ago involving a congregation somewhere in the south which decided to observe Lent by erecting a realistic cross on the lawn of the church. But the neighbors complained to City Hall because the cross was so ugly. It wasn't pretty or pleasant. The idea of the cross was intolerable to the patriotic Jews of the day. They were, the more I read about them, admirable people. I can empathize with them. They wanted to be free. When they said "Messiah," they meant "liberator:" One who would drive the pagan Romans into the sea. The thought that their Messiah would be executed as a disturber of the peace, voluntarily yet, was simply intolerable. "A stumbling block," Paul said, on a day when he was feeling generous.

To the Gentiles, the intellectually astute Greeks, the idea was foolish. From the beginning logic seems to be on the side of the pagans. An all-powerful deity, vulnerable to the whims of humankind? An omnipotent creator with feelings? The Lord of the whirlwind, source of truth, ground of being, hung up on a cross like a criminal? Where, indeed, is the logic in that? But it had always been there. In the Jeremiah poem 600 years before, God is described, not as an angry, judgmental potentate, but as a parent who stoops and takes Israel by the hand and leads the people out of Egypt; a touchingly, intimate image. A God who loves tenderly, intimately and who cares personally about people - is not an idea philosophers have come to on the basis of their own reason. Thomas Merton wrote once:

"Sometimes a man may have no philosophy at all. His faith may be so inarticulate as to seem absurd. Nevertheless, he knows the peace of the one who has conquered everything."
(No Man Is an Island, p. 76)

Sometimes the church disguises the reality of the cross aesthetically, and sometimes, worse yet, the disguise is theological. It happens subtly when we convince ourselves that evangelical faithfulness necessitates sound marketing strategies, slick promotion, a Gospel that will make you feel better and help you succeed. It happens when the only criteria by which we measure ourselves is the world's definition of success. It happens when we allow the crucified one to be marketed like a new soap powder and the rigorously dangerous vocation of discipleship to become, in the words of a modern critic, "squeezingly soft enough to go one on one with Wendy's Diet Pepsi, and Miller Light."

The crucifixion of Jesus is what the Gospel is about. He said, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself" and it is true. The crucifixion addresses something fundamental, almost primal, within the human condition. There is something amiss. There is something wrong. That isn't a new discovery. But it is affirmed every morning with the arrival of the newspaper. There is a sour note in the human symphony and we can't seem to locate it. We have no comfortable precedent for how to live on this planet - in harmony with the other people who inhabit it. And so we are in the demonic dilemma of trying to convince ourselves that it is worth the life-blood of the world's only rich nations to construct more weapons of death, to produce peace. Even if you are convinced, that dilemma, which at present prevents us from investing in the lives of our children, our elderly, our sick and hungry and homeless - that dilemma is at least an eloquent symbol that something is amiss at the heart of things.

The crucifixion of Jesus happens in the middle of that kind of dilemma, and expresses the constant, hopeful, insistent love of God, for the whole order. The crucifixion is the suggestion of a strong hope in the midst of the darkness. God has not given up. God continues to love. God continues to offer the covenant of life.

St. Augustine, in the 4th century, wrote: "Thou hast made us restless until we find our rest in thee." So, at the most personal, most intimate level, where we live and move and have being, the crucifixion of Jesus addresses each one of us. Jeremiah's new covenant talks about a law written in the heart of each individual. The striking thing about that new covenant is its intense personal impact...It is in each, individual heart, no on tablets of stone or papyrus scrolls, or books of theology. The new covenant is in our hearts. And it is in each, individual heart that our deepest hurts are, our noblest dreams, our dearest loves, our strongest regrets, our worst fears.

Do we matter? Does my life amount to anything? When I die, will anybody care ultimately? Is there anything lasting, anything significant about these brief decades I am living? Is there anyway to live the rest of them with a little joy, a little hope, a little peace?

Yale professor William Muehl wrote:

> "The people to whom the Gospel is to speak today are not huddled fearfully in the shadow of ancient altars...they are rather wandering about aimlessly, troubled by the increasing suspicion that no one literally gives a damn about what they do."
> (<u>All the Damned Angels</u>, p. 38)

God's new covenant, sensed by a poet six centuries before Christ, is written in your heart. It is sealed by God's love in this awesome, beautiful dying. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ means that you matter and I matter: that God cares deeply and ultimately and eternally about us...This dying means that the worst that can happen has already happened...to God, and that, therefore, you and I can live into the future in the confidence that the God who loves, has lived through and overcome death, the death of our dearest ones, even our own dying.

So it seems the best of us are willing to be silent before the cross...to resolve in our heart of hearts, where that covenant is written new every morning; to love this Lord with some small measure of the love with which he has loved us; to honor this Lord by living in love, new every morning; to be silent finally, and to allow artists, poets, musicians to express that for which we have no words.

What language shall I borrow
To thank this dearest friend
For this Thy dying sorrow
Thy pity without end?

O make me thine forever:
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to thee. Amen.